

EIGIL GREVE KNUTH 1903 – 1996



Eigil Knuth (left), Carl Langseth (back), department chief, Ministry of Defence, and Kjeld Olesen (right), Minister of Defence, in Peary Land during the summer of 1972.

The Nestor of Danish polar explorers is dead. Between 11 and 12 March 1996, Eigil Knuth expired in his apartment at Carl Johansgade 10 in Copenhagen's East End, where he had lived for more than 60 years. It was his stronghold through all those years, and what activities those walls have seen! Count Eigil Knuth was born on 8 August 1903 at Klampenborg, an affluent community 10 km north of Copenhagen, the son of captain Eigil Greve Knuth and Djimphna, née Gamel. Eigil Knuth once pointed out to me that perhaps he was destined from birth to become a polar explorer. His maternal grandfather, State Councillor Augustinus Gamel, was a very rich merchant. In 1881, Gamel bought a ship, which was rebuilt, reinforced, and renamed *Djimphna*, in order to rescue the American expedition on board the *Jeannette*, trapped in the Arctic Ocean north of Siberia. When it was learned that the *Jeannette* had been crushed in the pack ice at the New Siberian Islands, Mr. Gamel instead outfitted the ship to go on a Danish scientific expedition to the same area. Two localities in the research area now carry the name *Djimphna*. State Councillor Gamel also financed Fridtjof Nansen's crossing of the Greenland Inland Ice in 1888, and Nansen gave him the pocket compass he carried with him and used to chart his course during the crossing. Mr. Gamel gave that compass to his grandson as a birth gift. No wonder Knuth felt he might be predestined to carry out work in Greenland.

Knuth was always of an uneasy mind, which was especially visible when he was younger. He graduated from one of Copenhagen's oldest, best, and most distinguished high schools (*gymnasium*), but instead of attending the university, he continued at a technical school for apprentices to gain admission to the building technique school of the Academy of

Fine Arts, where he spent the years from 1922 to 1924. He then moved to Italy for three years to study sculpture. Back in Denmark, he spent a year at Niels Buck's Gymnastic Folk High School and graduated as a gymnastics teacher in the spring of 1932. That same summer, he participated for the first time in the excavating of old Norse ruins in West Greenland, assisting Dr. Aage Roussel from the National Museum. Of course, he acquired the so-called Greenland bug (*Bacterium Groenlandicum*) a close variety of *B. Arcticum*, with which I assume most of my readers are familiar. People seldom are cured of it, and Knuth was no exception. However, for the next two years he was art critic at *Dagens Nyheder*, a now-discontinued Copenhagen newspaper. There was tremendous activity in Greenland in the years around 1930. Danish, English, Norwegian, Italian, French, and American expeditions were all over the island. It was mostly for political reasons that Denmark moved her interest from North Greenland to East Greenland in 1926, under the direction of Lauge Koch in the northern part, and in 1931, under Knud Rasmussen, to the southern part. The Norwegian occupation of parts of East Greenland in 1931 caused the last move. The development of the aeroplane during and after World War I gave rise to speculations about air routes across the Atlantic with stops in Greenland and Iceland. These speculations and the English interest in mountaineering and Inland Ice crossing provided the impetus for the British expeditions under Watkins, Lindsay, Courtauld, and Wager. French mountain climbers supported by Charcot joined in, and the Americans sent the newly created national hero Charles Lindbergh on a reconnaissance paid for by Pan American Airlines.

It would be completely unbelievable not to find Eigil Knuth somewhere in all this. During the summer of 1934, he was excavating old Norse ruins, this time at Igaliko, again assisting Dr. Roussell and also Dr. Poul Nørlund. In 1935 he was archaeologist on the Courtauld Expedition to East Greenland, during which Gunbjørns Fjeld, Greenland's highest mountain, was climbed. There Knuth was assisting Dr. Helge Larsen from the National Museum, and without doubt their discussions had an important impact on Knuth the future archaeologist. Dr. Larsen had excavated the old Eskimo ruins on Clavering Island in 1931–32. They discussed the possibility of demonstrating the influence of a group of Eskimos who had migrated from the north on people who had already migrated from the south. In 1936 Knuth participated in the *Expédition Française Transgroenland*, traversing the Inland Ice from west to east with, among others, Paul Émile Victor. Arriving at Ammassalik on the east coast, Knuth built a house that still stands, and in which he worked on a book, *Fire Mand og Solen* (Four Men and the Sun), about the crossing of the Inland Ice, and sculpted a series of fine busts, using the Ammassalik people as models. During the summer of 1996, the busts were displayed at the Greenland Landsmuseum at Nuuk in a special exhibit sponsored by the Greenland Home Rule Administration. During the Courtauld expedition, Knuth had many talks with Ebbe Munck, in which they agreed that their generation owed the nation a Danish expedition comparable to the Danmark Ekspedition 1906–08. They decided to see that this idea materialized and was carried out under their leadership.

Knuth's heart was 100% set on Greenland, but his mind was perhaps not yet fully on archaeology. He and his good friend Ebbe Munck, planning their expedition, asked the National Museum to recommend an archaeologist. The answer was that, since the archaeologists they would consider were all engaged in work that could not be postponed, Knuth himself should undertake the archaeological investigations on the expedition. This answer placed Knuth in a difficult situation: he had not contemplated wintering up north, but planned to winter in his old house in Ammassalik further south, where everything awaited his return to his artistic work. Because the archaeological program of the expedition could not be scrapped, Knuth had to change plans and become not only the co-leader of the expedition, but also its archaeologist. It took strenuous work to raise the money for the expedition (Knuth himself paid the lion's share), buy a ship, get all the outfit together, and choose and buy the provisions. Their expedition, called *Dansk Nordgrønlands Ekspedition 1938–39*, udsendt af Alf Trolle, Ebbe Munck og Eigil Knuth til Minde on Danmark Ekspeditionen (Danish Northeast Greenland Expedition 1938–39, sent out by Alf Trolle, Ebbe Munck, and Eigil Knuth in memory of the Danmark Expedition) finally weighed anchor on 19 June 1938, bound with great expectations for the land of their dreams.

The expedition was the first Danish Greenland expedition to make use of an aeroplane—a little Tiger Moth borrowed complete with crew from the Danish army. Using the Tiger Moth allowed the expedition ship *Gamma* to negotiate the ice

belt with comparative ease. However, having reached the coast, the ship was unable to travel as far north as planned, and the expedition had to establish its headquarters in Mørkefjord, about 40 km west of the old expedition house at Danmark Harbor. From here the scientific investigations were carried out on long sledge journeys as far north as Mallemukfjæld, but well short of the promised land: Peary Land. The wintering team was exchanged in the summer of 1939 as planned, but the German assault on their neighbours started World War II and forced Knuth to stay home in Copenhagen for a while. During the German occupation of Denmark, Knuth became announcer for Denmark's Radio and as such rendered the Danish resistance movement invaluable services.

As soon as the war was over, Knuth and Munck began to organize the contemplated expedition to Peary Land. Paid for by the newly established Danish Expedition Foundation, it would be the first in a long row of Peary Land Expeditions headed by Knuth. From a base station in Young Sound at Zackenberg, the Catalina airplanes (U.S. surplus) transported everything necessary for a scientific station to Brønlund Fjord, where the expedition house "Brønlund Hus" was built. Knuth wintered there in 1948–50, and from there he carried out the many sledge and hiking trips that resulted in such great archaeological discoveries. One of the more sensational findings was the well-preserved wooden skeleton of an *umiak* (women's boat) discovered on the Herlufsholm Beach close to a tent village. There he also found a large collection of all kinds of tools and other household articles, which showed that the village belonged to the Thule culture. On the terraces along Brønlund Fjord, he found tool fragments from the older Dorset culture. However, Knuth deserves most credit for the demonstration of his, as he called them, Independence I and Independence II cultures, two immigration waves, almost 3000 years apart, of Palaeoeskimos, who migrated from Canada over northern Greenland and down the northern part of East Greenland. Independence I is most likely a branch of the oldest Saqqaq culture, whereas Independence II may be an early phase of the Dorset culture.

Knuth's initiative also resulted in much new information in geology, zoology, and botany, disciplines that had not yet been studied to any extent in this remote part of the world.

Like everybody else who has spent just a summer in East Greenland, Knuth became very preoccupied with the dramatic end of Sledge Team I of the Danmark Ekspedition of 1906–08. One objective of all his expeditions was, if possible, to collect any new information that might shed some light on this now 90-year-old enigma. Twice, in 1954 and 1955, Knuth with one companion, both times a radio operator, made a summer voyage on foot, dragging a Lapp (Saami) *pulk* (rope-drawn sledge) to the innermost part of the Danmark Fjord. Many believed this to be a key point in the drama of Sledge Team 1. Travelling from Station Nord, he was able to spend only four hours at Cape Holbæk in 1954 because of bad weather conditions. In 1955 he was luckier: he was able to spend three months there. But while his archaeological investigations had very positive results, the Danmark Ekspedition riddle remained unsolved.

Eigil Knuth was a very complex character. He was the artist par excellence; he was the author of several books, many papers, and numerous articles. And what a writer he was! His descriptions of Greenland landscapes, for instance, are masterpieces in beauty of sterling value. He was a sculptor with his own characteristic style and also a draftsman and a painter. He was a philosopher but also an exact scientist. Yes, he had many strings to his bow. He had the courage of his convictions—strong as they often were—and furthermore was unbelievably stubborn, two characteristics that often caused a falling out with people or with the bureaucracy. It is said that no one is a prophet in his own country. Knuth experienced the truth of this saying in his archaeological endeavours, but he had the satisfaction of living to see his findings and conclusions recognized by his fellow archaeologists. His contributions to science were in every respect as important as those of his great predecessors within Danish arctic exploration, whose eminence has maintained

Denmark's honour in the outside world. His country conferred numerous honours upon him, and the University of Copenhagen bestowed upon him the honorary Doctor of Science degree.

It fell to Eigil Knuth's lot to be the last to lead an arctic expedition in the old-fashioned way, with ship and dog sledge as the main means of transportation. It is amazing to see what he was able to accomplish with very small means, where later aeroplanes, tractors, three-wheelers, and huge sums of money were used, but here his stubbornness kicked in. He wanted so badly to carry out his expeditions that he just did it with what he had. Knuth's Peary Land Expeditions ended in 1995, when he visited his beloved Brønlund Hus, his headquarters for so many years, for the last time.

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